



Lafayette Historical Society

NEWS

Enlightening Our Community

Lafayette, California

July 2011

Vol. 39, No. 4

Please join the Lafayette Historical Society for
A Private Backstage Tour of TOWN HALL

When: *Thursday, July 21 ~ 7:00 p.m. - 8:30 p.m*

Cost: *Donation Request: \$10 members - \$15 non-members*

Please call 283.1848 or email lafayette.history@comcast.net



Make Your Reservations Now for Our Exclusive Event!

Join us Thursday ~ July 21 ~ 7:00 pm to 8:30 pm
for an private backstage tour of this
"Hidden Gem" in Lafayette.

Artistic Director, **Clive Worsely** will take us on a backstage tour of the theatre, prop- and dressing-rooms all the while discussing the fascinating history of the historic building. There is so much to know about this building and the activities that have taken place in it – you won't want to miss the presentations!

We will observe a portion of the rehearsal of *Thornton Wilder's "Our Town"* currently in production by Town Hall Kids Teen Actors Guild.

Following the tour, you'll be able to visit with directors **Joel Roster** and **Dennis Markam** who will answer your questions about their work with this fine group of young local actors.

The concession stand will be open for your refreshment enjoyment with proceeds going to Town Hall Theatre Company of Lafayette.

You will also hear about what the future holds for Town Hall!

Participation is limited and though the Theatre has handicap access, *the backstage and prop areas do not.*

Parking is available adjacent to the theatre on School Street.

Please call the Lafayette Historical Society at (925) 283-1848 or send an email to lafayette.history@comcast.net for questions and reservations!

President's Message

I hope many of our readers were in attendance for the wonderful program we presented on the **Caldecott Tunnel Fourth Bore Project**. There were 160 attendees including some of our historical friends from Moraga and Orinda. Kudos to **Ivy Morrison and her project partners** for a most interesting geological and historical program.



Fourth Bore presentation

and volunteers in our newsletters. This issue highlights two people from opposite ends of the age spectrum: **Ollie Hamlin's** family has been a part of Lafayette history since the late 1800's and he serves as a volunteer in the History Room as well as the Recording Secretary of the historical society. **Michael Troutman** has been an incredible asset inputting data and uploading photos into *Past Perfect*, our museum software. Read more about both of them in this issue. Meet other volunteers in upcoming issues.

Look for *Old Betsy* and the LHS crew at the **Art & Wine Festival** on *September 17th and 18th*. We will be sharing space with the LLLCF partners near Chow Restaurant. Please stop by to say hello and admire how beautiful *Old Betsy* looks thanks to **George Wasson and friends**.

Now that summer has arrived (finally) please plan to stop in and visit us in the History Room. We have some new artifacts to view and displays to see and are open *Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday from 12-2*. While visiting, get a jump on your holiday shopping as there are many items that would make great gifts for Lafayette aficionados. Also check out the historical display in the main library on "Everyday Life in Lafayette in the 30's and 40's".

—Mary McCosker



Dining, Dancing and –*Yes – Even Gambling* Enlivened Lafayette's Tunnel Strip

Considering the understated, sophisticated restaurants of Lafayette today it may come as a surprise that the eating establishments of Lafayette's recent past were almost racy by comparison. *Yes, racy!*

In the 1930's and 40's when Mount Diablo Boulevard was still old Tunnel Road, Lafayette's restaurant row was known as the *Tunnel Strip*. People drove from Oakland and even San Francisco to dance at the *El Nido Rancho* on the west side of town, or eat at the *Curve* (today *Celia's*) and *Planter's Dock* perched high on the hill (now the *Jewish Community Center*). *Alsam's* (today site of *Citibank*) was named for owners **Al** and **Sam Morterra**, and **Jay Bedsworth**, owner of the *Tunnel Inn* (today the site of *Pet Food Express*) flipped dollar bills with thumbtacks onto the ceiling. And of course, *Lou's Roundup* restaurant and bar has been on the south side of Mount Diablo Boulevard since 1935.

"*Alsam's* was a continental restaurant and night club that had entertainment in the evenings and great bands," according to **Ted Murphey**, who ran one of Lafayette's early drug stores. "Lafayette restaurants had good orchestras even up to the late 1950's. I remember hearing **Bob Scobie** and his band here." (*If anyone remembers Bob Scobie, please call LHS and tell us about him!*)

Three hot spots, *Rose Lee Night Club*, *Danny Van Allen's* and the *El Molino*, were located in the vicinity of the intersection of Mount Diablo Boulevard and Oak Hill Road (near the site of today's *Uncle Yu's*).

Nick Trujillo, long time Lafayette barber, recalled, "Where *Citibank* is today there was a dance hall that had slot machines and gambling in back. It was originally called *Alsam* then later renamed *Acapulco*."

Lou Repetto, another long time Lafayette resident added, "The most important place to eat in town was *El Nido Rancho* continental restaurant, which was demolished with the coming of the freeway. There was a tropical restaurant called *Planter's Dock* that moved here from Oakland that was also pretty fancy." (Lou, who passed away, is remembered fondly.)

Tom Courtright of *Orchard Nursery* recalled, "As you look up toward the *Jewish Temple* you can still see a little of the waterfall that was on the grounds of *Planter's Dock*. The restaurant had tiki god statues lining the drive all the way from Mount Diablo Boulevard up to the parking lot."

Many old timers remember the original *Petar's* (then in a wooden building on the north side of Mount Diablo Boulevard). **Ned Robinson**, retired attorney and former mayor, summed it up, "*Petar's* was popular because the food was good, and he always had very attractive blonde, buxom hostesses." (**Ned** is also remembered fondly. He passed away, in 2009.)



El Molino Restaurant

Lafayette's Tunnel Strip— *Continued from page 3*

Tom Whitten, property developer and retired engineer, added, “**Petar** was quite a character in the old European style. He’d kiss all the ladies’ hands. He was very charming and always well dressed. He was the former maitre d’ at **Bimbo’s** on Columbus Avenue in San Francisco. When I was a kid, **Bimbo’s** was famous for what they called the nude in the fish bowl. Somehow they projected a rather fuzzy image of a supposedly naked mermaid swimming around in this giant fish bowl.”

And, of course, in the 1930’s and 40’s, everybody who was anybody – including Boston Red Sox’s all-star slugger **Ted Williams** (whose father lived in Walnut Creek) – ate at **Bill’s Place**. **Edward and Marie Bill’s** restaurant was located behind the **Flying A** service station (*today near the site of Wachovia Bank*) from 1934 until 1950.

There were family style restaurants too. In the 1950’s local teens’ favorite hangout was **Chaps Drive-In**, next to the **Chevron** station at the intersection of Mount Diablo Boulevard and Happy Valley Road. “They had this big neon sign with a cowboy wearing chaps,” former mayor **Anne Grodin** remembered.

“We loved **Freddie’s Pizza**, which was originally in the brick building where **Pizza Antica** is today,” **Miler Magrath** of **Diamond K Supply** added. “When I was a little older I used to love the **Refectory**, a great steak house, behind where **Citibank** is now.”

Scotty Loucks, insurance broker, saved a menu from the **Whirlybird Inn**, perhaps the singularly most unusual restaurant in Lafayette’s colorful recent history. It was located on the hill near the **Lafayette heliport**, which was across from **Sunset Village** (above today’s **Veterans Building**). For a few years from the late 1960’s to early 1970’s, a helicopter service ferried passenger to and from SFO and Oakland airports, before noise complaints from nearby residents plus economic necessity led to the service’s demise.

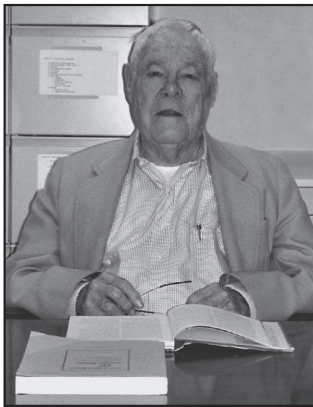
(This article is excerpted from **Voices of Lafayette** by Julie Sullivan, which is on sale at the Lafayette History Room.)

Want to discover more about Lafayette’s recent and not so recent past? Go to www.lafayettehistory.org, stop by the **History Room**, or call 925-283-1848. The **History Room** on the ground floor of the Library and Learning Center is open **Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, 10 a.m. – 2 p.m.**

—Julie Sullivan



Meet Our Board and Volunteers



Ollie Hamlin

Ollie was born and raised in Piedmont and remembers visiting his grandfather's ranch in Lafayette in the summer. He remembers coming out to Lafayette in summer time and during Easter vacation when he learned to milk cows and shoot rifles.

In 1940, Ollie's father built a house on the original **Hamlin Ranch** at the top of the hill going toward Rheem and called it *Sky Hy*. *The Lafayette Horse Show* was originally held on the **Hamlin ranch** for about ten years from 1932 to 1942.

Ollie remembers riding his horse to **The Curve** restaurant. Other memories include the **Roundup** and attending the opening of the **Park Theater** around 1940. His father was instrumental in changing the names of what were then Oakland Street, Commercial Street and Jonas Hill to Moraga Road.

After graduating from Stanford University in 1921, Ollie went into the Navy until 1946. He was the radar officer on the *USS Farragut*, a destroyer that escorted battleships and small carriers in the Aleutians.

In 1947 Ollie earned an MBA from UC Berkeley. Later he and his wife Virginia lived in a home built on five acres of land given by his father on Old Jonas Hill Road.

After the war, Ollie was in sales before getting his real estate license in 1960. He had a real estate office at 3370 Mt. Diablo Blvd. for more than twenty years. He managed real estate projects in Antioch, building a neighborhood shopping center, and managed family property in South San Francisco.

His recollections of Lafayette in earlier times make him an invaluable member of the Association where he also serves as *Corresponding Secretary*.



Michael Troutman

One of the Historical Society's newest volunteers is **Michael Troutman**, a graduate of local schools and UC Berkeley. Michael is very knowledgeable in the field of computers (he graduated with a degree in Electrical Engineering and Computer Science) and has spent many hours adding our collection of historical photos into the computer using **Past Perfect**, a data base tailored for historical societies and museums. He also provides tech support to volunteers with limited computer abilities for which we are all very appreciative.

When not slaving over the computer at our offices, Michael enjoys viewing and writing about films and has a film blog he writes.

Find it at ishootthepictures.blogspot.com.

The Historical Society is so glad that Michael is volunteering here and not only working with our data base but helping many of us merge past history with new technology.

A Bit of History *(excerpted from an article by Dorothy Mutnick-1978)*

A new school was built in 1893 nearer the road than one built in 1871. The older building was moved in 1922 to the south side of the road to Oakland by the *Lafayette Improvement Association* to be used as the post office, telephone central and the library. It is still there [as the Red Wagon shop] behind a new façade. The school board bought lots across the road and built the current *Lafayette Elementary School*. The school house and lot was sold to the church. The building was remodeled for their use and eventually incorporated within the present



Third School 1930's

United Methodist Church.

Stanley School is located on one of the parcels set off in the partition of *Rancho Laguna de los Palos Colorados*. Its site was purchased from **Frank Ghiglione** who added it and the area west to Moraga Road to their farm land in 1907. First buying land in *Rancho Acalanes* in 1902, they began in 1904 to acquire land in *Happy Valley* eventually owning 193 acres there.

Until after World War II when California's population again grew the economy of the area remained based on agriculture. Orchards and truck farming were supplanting grains but native grasses on the beautiful green-then-brown hills were grazed by cattle, many of them dairy, and produced hay for San Francisco and Oakland draft- and carriage-horses some of which themselves were raised or pastured within Lafayette boundaries. In the early subdivisions like "*Wagner's Lafayette Subdivision*" on either side of Mountain View Drive filed in 1900 and later resubdivided as *Lafayette Heights* or "*Subdivision of a portion of Ranch Acalanes*"—area earlier known as the "*Milk Ranch*"—about Road in 1910 lots were of ample acreage to be used for farming and recreation—so generous each was subdivided itself, witness *Happy Valley Estates* (1938) or *Lafayette Crescent* (1945). In 1923 180 acres in *Happy Valley* were bought by the *New Spring Farm Company* owned by some Japanese (whose fate in the internment of the war period was unlearned) in 1927 when it sold 120 acres to an individual farmer. Both began to sell off small acreages in 1938.

Transportation over the hills was ever a deterrent to trade. From the beginning there was agitation to get better roads, to bore a tunnel, to build a railroad. Grains were carted to Pacheco then to Port Costa for loading on ships. Some relief was given by the opening of the high level tunnel and later the *Sacramento Northern electric railroad* whose route followed Las Trampas Creek through Lafayette. It served commuters to Alameda County and to Mt. Diablo High School, the high school that served the Lafayette Community until *Acalanes High School* was built.

After *Acalanes High School District* was established it purchased in 1939 the site for its first school from **Guy L. Putman**. The *East Bay Municipal Utility District* was acquiring property got various purposes in several areas of the present city before they completed the *Lafayette Reservoir* in 1929. The route of Highway 75A was surveyed in 1936 realigning the existing road through the business area leveling the ridges and the ravines as a coordinate of the new low level tunnel. Some alteration was made with the advent of the freeway and the *BART District*.

—Mary McCosker

Can You Help Us?

Here is another picture you may be able to help identify!

We have this photo of these wonderful boys and girls collecting pennies for the Lafayette Community Club.

Is this you? Is this your Dad or Mom? Maybe your Grandpa or Grandma!



Deposit Pennies Here

2011-2012 Board of Directors

President: Mary McCosker

Vice President: Marechal Duncan

Treasurer: Paul Sheehan

Recording Secretary: Nancy Flood

Corresponding Secretary: Oliver Hamlin

Keith Blakeney

Judie Peterson

Tom Titmus

Laura Torkelson

George Wasson

Contact Us:..... History Room – 283-1848

– or – lafayette.history@comcast.net

We'd sure like to know when this collection took place, who these cute kids are and if they reached their goal of 1,000,000 pennies!

The **History Room** is home to more than 3,000 photos dating back to the late 1800's. We are currently adding them to our PastPerfect Museum database so that they are more easily accessed. We still need help identifying many of the people in these photos and *would love to have YOUR HELP!* Please consider coming into the **History Room** to help with our "investigation"!

Give us a call at (925) 283-4106 or send us and email to lafayette.history@comcast.net or drop by the **History Room** any Tuesday, Thursday or Saturday – 10:00 am-2:00 pm.



Return Service Requested



Lafayette Historical Society Membership Application

(Please photocopy form for additional names)

Name: _____

Spouse: _____

Address: _____

City-Zip: _____

Phone: _____

E-mail: _____

Membership Categories and Annual Dues

(Please check one)

- ☐ Student Membership \$10.00
- ☐ Individual Membership \$25.00
- ☐ Family Membership \$50.00
- ☐ Sponsor Membership \$500.00

Please indicate areas of special interest

- | | |
|---|--|
| ☐ Publicity | ☐ Data Base Entry of Photos |
| ☐ Research-Genealogy | ☐ Photo Collection |
| ☐ Telephoning | ☐ News Clippings |
| ☐ Displays | ☐ Fire Engine |
| ☐ Oral Histories | ☐ Walking Tours-Outreach |
| ☐ History Room | ☐ Other _____ |

Please mail this application to:

Lafayette Historical Society

P.O. Box 133

Lafayette, CA 94549